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Prophets of the East: The Ilkhanid Historian Rashīd al-Dīn on the Buddha, Laozi and Confucius and the Question of his Chinese Sources (Part 1)*

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Abstract

The Ilkhanid vizier and historian Rashīd al-Dīn's section on China (the *History of China*) in his world history, the *Jāmiʿ al-tawārīkh*, is the first Persian history of the Chinese world. Among other information on China, this text includes accounts of the lives and deeds of the founders of the three major religious and philosophical schools of China: Buddha, Laozi and Confucius. These are probably the first discussions of Laozi and Confucius in the Islamicate world. This paper focuses on Rashīd al-Dīn's life of Buddha in his *History of China*. Reading these excerpts against the background of Chinese sources, striking similarities can be found between Rashīd al-Dīn's account and the narratives of Buddhist 'universal histories' of the early Yuan period, belonging to the historiographical production of the Chan school.

Keywords

Rashīd al-Dīn, Sino-Persian Relations, Buddha, Laozi, Confucius, Chinese Sources of Jāmiʿ al-tawārīkh, Intellectual History of the Mongol Empire

Introduction

Due to the great distance separating Iran and China, Chinese chronicles and history books never reached our lands, nor did Chinese intellectuals. Even

* For editorial reasons the article, which was originally conceived as a single work, has been split in two parts. The second part will be published in the next issue of the journal.

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> *the kings of this land never commissioned researches and investigation about things pertaining to that land and did not pay attention to it. However, when Mongke Qā'ān became Qā'ān and the emperor of the world, he sent his brother Hulagū, son of Tolūi son of Chinggīz Khān, to the land of Iran, and he became ruler in this realm. Chinese sages, astronomers and physicians then came to Iran with him.*[1]

This is how the Ilkhanid historian and vizier Rashīd al-Dīn (d.1318) opens his *History of the Ruling Families of Cathay* (*Tārīkh-i aqwām-i pādshāhān-i Khutāy*, also known as *Tārīkh-i Chīn*, i.e. 'History of China'). Renowned for his intellectual engagement with the non-Muslim world, Rashīd al-Dīn has often been deemed the 'first world historian'—to quote the expression coined by Karl Jahn (1967).[2] Such opening is telling of the new turn that Sino-Persian relations took with the establishment of the Ilkhanate (1256-1335), when cultural contacts between Iran and the Chinese world were perhaps at their apex.[3] Indeed, Rashīd al-Dīn's fascination with China can be read against the wider background of the unprecedented period of interconnection and exchange across Eurasia enabled by Mongol rule in the 13th and 14th centuries. The two works that the

[1] *Dar hīch ʿahd-ī kutub-i tawārīkh-i īshān wa ḥikāyāt-i ān dar īn mulk nabūda, bi wāsiṭa-yi buʿd-i masāfat, wa ḥukamā wa dānāyān-i īshān īnjā narasīda-and wa pādshāhān-i īn wilāyat nīz bi tatabbuʿ wa tafaḥḥuṣ-i ān māyil nabūda, wa badān iltifāt nanimūda. Wa dar zamān-ī ki nawbat-i Qā'ānī wa pādshāhī rūy-i zamīn bi Mongke Qā'ān rasīd, barādar-i khwīsh Hulagū Khān ibn-i Tolūy Khān ibn-i Chinggīz Khān-rā bi īrān zamīn firistād, wa pādshāhī-yi īn mamālik bar way muqarrar shud, az ḥukamā wa munajjimān wa aṭibbā'-yi Khatāy dar bandagī-i way āmada būdand* (Rashīd al-Dīn 2006a: 5).

[2] Rashīd al-Dīn's *History*, composed in 1304-1305, is in fact part of his wider universal history, the *Jāmiʿ al-tawārīkh* ('Compendium of chronicles'), which alongside the history of the Mongols and of the Islamicate world includes sections on various peoples of the world. On Rashīd al-Dīn as a 'world historian' also see Boyle 1971; Morgan 1982; Atwood 2013, while for a contextualization of his work on the wider background of the intellectual history of the Islamic world see Kamola 2013. For a discussion of the structure and contents of the *Jāmiʿ al-tawārīkh,* see Melville 2008. On the fortune—or lack thereof—of this work in the Islamic world, see Sela 2013; on that of the *History,* see Jahn 1971a.

[3] Contacts between the Iranian world and China date well before the Mongol period (see Pulleyblank 1992; Rogers 1992; Franke 1966). With the establishment of the Ilkhanate in Iran, however, these further tightened under the auspices of intra-Mongol exchanges (see Allsen 2004). Rashīd al-Dīn's words on the arrival of Chinese and Mongolians in Ilkhanid Iran are mirrored by the claim of the Persian historian Juwaynī (2007, vol. 1, 9), according to whom many Muslims in those very days were settling in the East.

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Ilkhanid vizier dedicated to the Chinese world, the *History of China* (hereafter *History*) and the *Tānksūqnāma-yi Ilkhāni* (The Treasure Book of the Ilkhāns), a Persian translation of Chinese texts and medical treatises, testify to his engagement with this space.[4]

The scholarly community has recognized the importance of these texts, which in some respects show similarities with the seminal works of pre-modern Islamic Indology, such as those by Bīrūnī (d.1048), as attempts by a pre-modern Muslim scholar at engaging in depth with the intellectual tradition of a non-monotheistic, non-Mediterranean civilization.[5] Nevertheless, most of the information on the Chinese world they report—most of which was then made available to the Islamicate community for the first time—still has to be analyzed in depth.[6] Yet, Rashīd al-Dīn's *History*—and the many considerations on Chinese history, mythology, art and culture it contains—should instead be considered carefully.

[4] It has been suggested that most of the second volume of the *Jāmiʿ al-tawārīkh*, including the *History*, is not to be attributed to Rashīd al-Dīn but to one of his contemporaries, the historian ʿAbd Allāh Qāshānī, himself active at the Ilkhanid court. Thus, Rashīd al-Dīn would just have 'borrowed' Qāshānī's work with minor modifications and without giving him credit (on the matter, which is not settled yet, see Brack 2016: 322-347; Otsuka 2014). Given that both authors had strong ties with the Mongol court, however, the issue of the authorship of the *History* is only marginally relevant to our discussion, which is concerned with the intellectual and religious milieu of the Ilkhanid court, the Chinese cultural objects which circulated in it and the wider circulation of East Asian textual material in the Persianate world.

[5] On Bīrūnī and Islamic Indology, see Kozah 2015.

[6] Secondary literature on the *Tānksūqnāma* is limited and mostly focuses on the role it played in transmitting Chinese medical knowledge to the West rather than on the information it contains on Chinese culture (see Wang/Lo 2013; Berlekamp 2010; Klein-Franke/Zhu 1996). Less recent studies on the *Tānksūqnāma* are Abdulhak 1940; Mīnuwī 1971; Jahn 1969; *idem* 1970. The lack of a reliable critical edition of this text, which survives in a single manuscript, a copy of which has been published in Iran by Mīnuwī (1972), does not facilitate its study. A preliminary edition, yet not exempt from errors, has been recently established by Guang (2009) in a doctoral dissertation at the University of Tehran. More scholarship is available on the *History*. Two critical editions of this text were published in Iran, first by Wang (Rashīd al-Dīn 2000) and then by Rawshan (Rashīd al-Dīn 2006a), and a German translation was published by Jahn (1971b). On the *History*, see also Wang's introduction and notes to her edition of the text (2000), as well as to her Chinese translation (2006); Honda 1988; Franke 1951; Kim 2018. On Rashīd al-Dīn and China, see Jahn 1969; *idem* 1971a; *idem* 1970.

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As the first (and perhaps only) work on China composed with the aid of Chinese informants and primary sources in pre-modern Persian literature, the *History* is in itself a one of a kind. No other Persian text discusses at such length the subtleties of the Chinese script, dynastic history or cosmological myths, as well as a vast array of other details, which are mentioned *in passim*.[7]

This paper discusses one of the most fascinating topics explored by Rashīd al-Dīn in his *History*, namely the lives of the founders of the three major philosophical and religious doctrines of China: Buddha, Laozi and Confucius. To the best of our knowledge, the *History* is the first Persian text—and perhaps the first ever composed within the Islamicate world—reporting on the lives of Laozi and Confucius. Yet, despite their historical importance, these excerpts seem to have never been discussed by scholars apart from a brief mention by Franke (1951). The same is true for the occurrence of a life of the Buddha in the *History*, which, despite the existence of a German translation of this text by Jahn (1971b), seems to have passed mostly unnoticed. In fact, this account on the life of the Buddha is seldom discussed or referred to, even in the studies focusing on Ilkhanid Buddhism or on the longer and better-known account of Buddha and Buddhism found in the second section of Rashīd al-Dīn's *History of India*. This is particularly striking insofar as the life of the Buddha from the *History*, as we will show, is drawn from a Chinese source and thus differs from the longer, better known account on Buddha reported in the *History of India*.

These excerpts show which Chinese legends on the lives of Laozi, Confucius and Buddha found their way west, how they changed—if they did at all—in the process of their transmission, and how they were re-

[7] To provide just one example, to the best of our knowledge, the *History* is the first Persian text mentioning the game of *weiqi* 圍棋, better known in the West by its Japanese name *go*, and its introduction in Ilkhanid Iran. Rashīd al-Dīn (2006a: 24) attributes its invention to the legendary Chinese emperor Yao 堯, traditionally thought to have ruled in the third millennium B.C.: "He invented the game, which in Chinese is called *weiqi*, which is also played in this kingdom. It has three hundred and sixty-six houses, on the model of the number of the days of the year" (*Wa bāzī ki ba zabān-i Khatāy waychī* [weiqi] *gūyand, wa dar īn mulk nīz mībāzand, wa 'adad-i khānahā-yi ān sīṣad wa shaṣt wa shish ast ba 'adad-i rūzhā-yi sāl, ū waẓi' karda*).

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ceived and understood in the Persianate world, thus furthering our understanding of Sino-Persian relations and of the Persian representation of this space. Furthermore, by contextualizing the *History* and the three *Lives*, this paper provides new elements on the issue of the Chinese sources of the text. Striking similarities between the *History* and a chronicle found in the Chinese Tripiṭaka, the *Fozu lidai tongzai* 佛祖歷代通載 (Comprehensive Record of Buddha and the Patriarchs Through the Ages, hereafter *Fozu*) compiled by the Chan monk Nian Chang 念常 (b.1282),[8] were first noted by Herbert Franke (1951) who hypothesized a common archetypal source for the two texts. Here, we offer a translation of both sources along with a comparative analysis, in order to investigate the relation between them, their differences and similarities, as well as to shed light on many Chinese elements reported by the Ilkhanid historian.

Tracing Rashīd al-Dīn's Chinese sources is an important step towards the development of a more nuanced representation of Ilkhanid Buddhism, which Roxann Prazniak (2014, 651) compared to a "fabric" with a "complex weave of many threads". This is, indeed, a good description, for Ilkhanid Buddhism seems to have been a complex phenomenon in which Tibetan, Indian, Chinese and Central Asian practices, doctrines and images coexisted in a remarkable cultural synthesis.[9] Specific Chinese influences have been noted by Jahn, Samuel Grupper and Johan Elverskog, and figurative motives typically associated with Chinese Buddhism survive in Ilkhanid Buddhist architecture, such as at Qonqor Ölöng and Takht-i Sulaymān.[10] However, no Chinese Buddhist text has been shown to be present at the Ilkhanid court so far. Tracing the sources of the *History*, we conclude that it reflects Chinese sources of the early Yuan period (1260-

[8] Nian Chang, *Fozu lidai tongzai*, CBETA ed. (Taishō; 49. 2036: 477a05-735b17).

[9] Surveys on Ilkhanid Buddhism are found in Grupper 2004; Prazniak 2014.

[10] See Jahn 1956, especially 110-128; Grupper 2004: 10-27, Elverskog 2010: 157-162, while for a survey on Chinese Buddhist motives in Ilkhanid art see Kadoi 2009. In his discussion of Ilkhanid Buddhism, Elverskog (2010: 158) noted the presence of some practices now associated with Chinese Buddhism at the Ilkhanid court, yet without ruling out the possibility that "these 'Chinese' practices were not only being performed by non-Chinese, but also from texts in languages other than Chinese". While Elverskog's *caveat* was appropriate considering the elements he discussed, we hope to add another piece to the puzzle, showing not only how Chinese Buddhists texts were present and read at the Ilkhanid court, but also to which Buddhist school and historical period some of these belonged.

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1368) belonging to the historiographical production of the Chan school of Buddhism, and thus that such texts must, indeed, have circulated at the Ilkhanid court.

Prophets of the East. Buddha, Laozi and Confucius in the *History of China*

The *History* deals with the whole of Chinese history, which, according to the author (2006a: 14), is an impressive 42,875 years long, and is structured as a dynastic history. The first dynasty is the one founded by Pangu 盤古, the first man, followed by the mythical dynasties the existence of which borders legend. Then we meet, with remarkable precision, the Xia 夏 (ca. 21st-17th century B.C.), the Shang 商 (ca. 17th-11th century B.C.), the Zhou 周 (11th century-256 B.C.), the Warring States period (481-221 B.C.) and so on, up to the fall of the Song dynasty (in 1279) and the Mongol conquest.[11] All the emperors are mentioned in due order, dynasty by dynasty and emperor by emperor, and it is indeed striking to remark how often the lists of emperors compiled by Rashīd al-Dīn coincide with the ones established in Chinese state-sponsored historiography. The text also includes the portraits of some of these emperors—all of them clearly copied from a Chinese source—for the author (2006a: 14) tells us that the Chinese include in their chronicles the portraits of the most revered sovereigns.[12]

A chapter is devoted to each dynasty, including the list of its emperors, as well as a short report of the main events and remarkable anecdotes (*'ajā'ib wa ġarā'ib*), relating to the reigns of each emperor. The accounts on the three 'prophets of the East' all appear in the section dedicated to the Zhou dynasty (Rashīd al-Dīn 2006a: 30-38) and to events that occurred during that era.

[11] In opening Chinese history with Pangu, the mythical ancestor of the Chinese, Rashīd al-Dīn (2006a: 14–17; also *idem* 2000: 186-87 for Wang's comment) reports a Chinese cosmological myth. The Xia dynasty is traditionally mentioned in Chinese historiography, but its historicity is disputed by modern scholars (see Chang 1999: 65-71).

[12] On these paintings see Blair 2017. Despite their distinctive Chinese look, as noted by Blair (2017: 822-823), mistakes in composition and attributes show that the artists involved were not Chinese.

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The *Life of the Buddha*

The first of the three Chinese prophets discussed by Rashīd al-Dīn is Buddha, whose life and deeds, according to the Ilkhanid historian, are as follows:

> *Among the events occurred during his reign* [*of King Zhao of Zhou*]*, there is what follows. Before then, in Cathay and India there were different religions, but there had been no-one who had claimed prophecy, and had a core of beliefs and a doctrine, which people could follow. During the reign of this king, Shikamūnī Burkhān*[13] *was born, whom the peoples of India, Kashmir, Tibet, Cithay, Tangqūt and Uyghūr recognize as prophet and follow. During the twenty-fourth year of rule of this king his prophetic message reached Cathay. Shikamūnī Burkhān lived seventy-eight years, and since the beginning of his predication to the present time—the year of the Dragon, corresponding to the year 704 of the* Hijra*—2,336 years have passed. The history of his life, of his prophetic claim and of his miracles and signs is as follows. It has been reported that his father was from the region of* Jiabiluowei *in the kingdom of Kashmir and Ak.k,*[14] *region, which he ruled with the name of Fāng Wān. As his dependencies he had 84,260, divided between kings, judges and governors of cities and regions, and he had a wife by the name of Mūya Fūjīn.*[15] *They say that when the two married she was a virgin and that she, untouched, was sleeping in a garden by the name of Lam Bīnī under a Yūkja*[16] *tree. The air shone with her light, then her right side opened and a child came out. Her husband, the king, asked her: "I did not come to you, and you*

[13] On the use of the Mongol name 'Shikamūnī Burkhān' through the *Jāmiʿ al-tawārīkh,* see Jahn 1956: 126, note 110; and Franke 1951: 25-26. As remarked by Franke in this same article, this is but one of several renderings of Middle Mongolian terms found in the text. Their presence may hint to the mediation of a Mongolian text, or to the influence of Rashīd al-Dīn's informants over the text. As noted by Atwood (2015: esp. 17; *idem* 2017), in fact, to compose his works Rashīd al-Dīn often started from a translation from Mongolian, which he then combined with identifications, comments, and other notes derived from his informants.

[14] None of the three editors of the text (Jahn, Wang, and Rowshan) could identify the word "Ak.k" (اکک).

[15] Note here, too, the Middle Mongolian form of the Chinese *furen* 婦人, on which see the Appendix.

[16] Indian traditions on the birth of the Buddha mention a *Shorea robusta* (Sanskrit *śāla*, Chinese *shaluo* 沙羅) and so do the Chinese sources, among which the *Fozu*. Jahn (1971b: 42, note 6) attributes Rashīd al-Dīn's *Yūkja*, a word which is not found in any Persian dictionary, to a misreading of his Chinese source.

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were a virgin. How did you get pregnant?" She answered: "I was in the garden under such and such tree, then abruptly a light descended upon me. I passed out, not knowing what had happened to me: I got pregnant from the light". When the child was born, angels descended from the sky, poured water on him from their mouths and washed him in a golden tub. Then he started running, and after he had made seven steps, talked and said: "God sent me as a prophet, until other prophets will come". He was extraordinarily beautiful, eloquent, strong, knowledgeable in all sciences and perfect. When he turned nineteen he went to the mountains, where he remained for a few years in complete fasting. It was then that he found the road to the truth,[17] *and after this period, he dedicated himself to the service of God for six more years in the mountains. Then he claimed prophecy, and the whole Kashmir and Ak.k, as well as most of India and Cathay accepted his religion and started following him. The history of his religion, his life and his moral qualities will be reported in our* History of India.[18]

[17] In this context the Persian word *ḥaqq* may also mean 'God'. Thus, the sentence *rāh-i ḥaqq biyāft* could also be rendered as 'he found the road [leading] to God'.

[18] *Wa az jumla-yi ḥawādiṯ ki dar zamān-i ū uftāda, yak-ī ān ast ki pīsh az ān dar mamālik-i Khatāy wa Hind maḏāhib-i mukhtalifa dāshta-and ki bar ān mīrafta, likan shakhṣ-ī ki daʿwa-yi payġāmbarī kunad wa ū-rā millat-ī wa rāh-ī bāshad ki khalq mutābaʿat-i ān kunand nabūda. Wa dar ahd-i īn pādshāh Shikamūnī Burkhān ki aqwām-i Hind wa Kashmīr wa Tibbit wa Khatāy wa Tangqūt wa Uyġūr ū-rā payġāmbar mīdānand wa jumla mutābaʿat-i ū mīkunand dar wujūd āmad, wa dar bist* [*wa*] *chahārum sāl az pādshāhī-i ū āwāza-yi daʿwat-i payġāmbarī-i ū ba Khatāy rasīd. Wa Shikamūnī Burkhān-rā haftād wa hasht sāl-i ʿumr būda, wa ibtidā-yi daʿwat-i ū tā īn zamān ki* [*lūī*]*ʾīl sāl* [*ażdahā*] *ast muṭābiq-i sana-yi arbaʿa wa sabaʿami'ya-yi hijrī muddat-i dū hizār wa sīṣad wa si wa shish sāl mībāshad. Wa ḥīkāyat-i ḥāl-i ū wa daʿwa-yi payġāmbarī wa karāmāt wa ʿalāmāt bar īn mūjib ast: taqrīr mīkunand ki pidar-i ū az mulk-i Kashmīr wa Ak.k būda, wa dar wilāyat-i Yūūgīābīlāwī wa pādshāh-i ān wilāyat, nām-i ū Fāng Wān, wa ḥākim wa muqaddam-i hashtād wa chahār hizār wa diwīst wa shaṣt malik wa ḥākim wa raʾīs-i shahrhā wa wilāyat*[*ha*] *būd, wa zan-ī dāsht Mūya Fūjīn nām, wa chunān mīgūyand ki chūn ū-rā bikhwāst bikr būd wa bā way ṣuḥbat nākarda, dar bāġ-ī ki nām-i ān Lam Bīnī* [*būd*]*, dar zīr-i dirakhtī ki ān-rā Yūkja khwānand khufta, wa ān hawā az nūr-i ū sipīd shuda, wa baʿd az ān jānib-i rāst-i pahlū-yi ū shikāfta wa bacha bīrūn āmada. Ān pādshāh ki shawharash būd pursīd ki man bi tū narasīda wa bikr būdī, az ki ḥāmila gashtī? Jawāb dād ki dar bāġ mīgashtam wa dar zīr-i fulān dirakht, nāgāh nūr-ī bar man uftād wa bīhūsh shudam wa nadānistam ki chīst, az ān ḥāmila gashtam. Wa hangām-i wilādat-i ān farzand fīrīshtagān az hawā furū āmada-and wa āb az dahan bar way mīrikhta, wa ū-rā dar ṭasht-ī zarrīn bishustand, wa ū bidawīd wa haft gām biraft wa bi āwāz āmad wa guft: ma-rā khudā-ī firistād tā payġāmbar bāsham, tā waqt-ī ki dīgar payġāmbarān bīāyand. Wa bi-ġāyat khūb-*

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As Rashīd al-Dīn himself writes, this account on the life of the Buddha forms a pair with the much better-known description of Buddhism and of the life of its founder he compiled in the second part of his *History of India* (Rashīd al-Dīn 2006b).[19] This shorter life of the Buddha, however, should not be considered a summarized version of the much longer discussion of the same subject found in the *History of India*. Quite to the contrary, in fact, the two texts report different and sometimes even contradictory information.[20] This is probably because they draw from different sources. In fact, while the *History of India* seems to be mostly based on the information provided to Rashīd al-Dīn by the Kashmiri monk Kamālashrī, many details mentioned in this excerpt suggest that Rashīd al-Dīn drew heavily from a Chinese source.[21]

In particular, the transcription of the toponyms and names mentioned throughout the text strongly hints at the presence of a Chinese source. In the *History of India*, coherently with the traditional account on the life of the Buddha reported in Indian sources, his parents are said to be king Śuddhodana and queen Māyā of Kapilavastu (کپلواس), the region ruled by

ṣūrat wa faṣīḥ wa bā-quwwat būd, wa dar hama abwāb dānā wa kāmil. Baʿd az ānki nūzdah sāla shud, bi kūh raft wa chand sāl dar kūh mībūd wa hīch namīkhwurd, āngāh rāh-i ḥaqq biyāft, wa baʿd az muddat-i shish sāl-i dīgar ham dar kūh bi ʿibādat mashġūl būd. Baʿd az ān daʿwat-i payġāmbarī kard, wa tamāmat-i wilāyat-i Kashmīr wa Ak.k wa akṯar-i Hindūstān wa Khatāy maḏhab-i ū-rā qabūl kardand [*wa*] *mutābiʿat nimūd, wa ḥikāyāt-i maḏhab wa sīrat wa akhlāq-i ū dar tārīkh-i hindawān mashrūḥ khwāhad āmad* (Rashīd al-Dīn 2006a: 33–35).

[19] On the account of Buddha and Buddhism found in the *History of India,* see Akasoy 2013; Yoeli-Tlalim 2013; Elverskog 2010: 145–162; Rajabzāda 2001; Jahn 1956. Persian text and German translation in Jahn 1980.

[20] To make but a few examples, in the *History of India* the chapter on Buddha's birth (Rashīd al-Dīn 2006b: 106-109) opens *in medias res* and gives no specific chronological coordinates, while here the Buddha is said to be born during the reign of King Cheng of the Zhou dynasty; here Buddha lives seventy-eight years, while in the *History of India* he dies at eighty; the latter text never mentions major elements of the Buddha's birth as reported here, such as the virginity of his mother and the light that impregnated her, the Lumbinī garden, the lateral birth and the dialogue between Buddha's parents. Furthermore, in the *History of India* the Buddha never withdraws into the mountains. Rather, he leaves the house when he turns twenty-nine (while in the *History* he does so at nineteen) to start travelling until, after a series of encounters, he meets a group of ascetics on the shores of the Ganges—a version which is much closer to canonical Indian sources.

[21] On Kamālashrī, about whom little is known, see Yoeli-Tlalim 2013: 201-204.

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his father and where he grew up.[22] Here, however, the Buddha's father is called "Fāng Wān", a transcription of the Chinese rendering of the name as (Jing) Fanwang (淨)飯王,[23] while his mother is "Mūya Fūjīn", rendering of the Moye *furen* 摩耶夫人 (Lady Maya) of the Chinese sources, derived from Middle Mongolian. Equally, in the *History* the Buddha's birth takes place in a region called "Yūūgīābīlāwī" (یووگیابیلاوی), which is the Persian transcription of the Chinese *Jiapiluowei* 迦毘羅衛 (Kapilavastu).[24] More specifically, here the Buddha comes to light in a garden called "Lam Bīnī" (لم بینی). This information reflects Indian sources, in which the birth of the Buddha is set in a garden by the name of 'Lumbinī'; yet, there is no trace of it in the *History of India*. The information must thus come from another source, namely the Chinese one we are looking for. Once again the transcription, as remarked by Wang (Rashīd al-Dīn 2000: 115), is coherent with the Chinese, for the Persian "Lam Bīnī" can easily transcribe the toponym *Lanpini* (藍毗尼) if we consider that, in the Yuan period, the Chinese character *lan* 藍 was pronounced 'lam' (Pulleyblank 1991: 182).

Furthermore, in the text under scrutiny the event is discussed from a distinctively sinocentric point of view. While the *History of India* does not offer any chronological coordinate to date Buddha's birth, here the chronological framework is provided by the succession of Chinese emperors: the Buddha was born during the reign of King Zhao 昭 of the Zhou dynasty (r. 977-957 B.C.), and during the twenty-fourth year of his reign Buddhism entered China. The other lands touched by Buddhism are not mentioned but once and *in passim*, as a list and in no particular order ("India, Kashmir, Tibet, Cathay, Tangqūt and Uyghūr"). In this regard, it should also be noted that Chinese sources are the ones more often retro-

[22] For a synthetic yet solid account of the traditional rendering of the birth and life of the Buddha, see Strong 2001: 35-77.

[23] As noted by Wang (Rashīd al-Dīn 2000: 114). For a complete list of Chinese terms in the *History* with Persian transcription and corresponding Chinese characters, see Isahaya/Endo 2017.

[24] See the notes by Wang (Rashīd al-Dīn 2000: 114). The Persian transcription of the name is consistent with the transcription found in the *Fozu* (see Appendix), whereas a more common Chinese transcription is *Jiaweiluowei* 迦維羅衛. The form exhibits possible Tibetanisms, something, as remarked by Buell (1968: esp. 95-124), found elsewhere in the *Fozu*, which has much Tibetan material regarding aPhags-pa and the Sa-sKya order, and in the biography of Dam-pa Dorje.

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dating Buddha's birth at or before the 10th century B.C., as Rashīd al-Dīn does here.[25]

Other details worth commenting are the golden tub in which the infant Buddha is washed by four angels at his birth and the fact that he is said to emerge from the left side of his mother instead of the right one, as traditionally reported in Indian sources. Two elements which the *History of India* ignores, and which point at the use of a Chinese source. In fact, Buddha is washed in a golden tub—a royal attribute meaning to underline the child's noble lineage—in both the *Fozu* and in the *History*. Similarly, the substitution of the right side with the left one as the point from which Buddha emerges is typically found in various Chinese sources (though not in the *Fozu*) and is due to the left's symbolic status in Chinese culture, which is superior to the right's (Scarpari 2004: XV). The impregnation of Buddha's mother by a light reminds of the legend of Alan Qo'a in the *Secret History* (De Rachewiltz 2004, vol. 1 § 21, 4), which hints a possible process of translation of the Buddhist myth for a Mongol audience. As to the virginity of Māyā, this detail is not mentioned in the canonical Buddhist texts. It may appear in Rashīd al-Dīn's source, or it may reflect his understanding of the conception of the Buddha, which, as remarked by Reiko Ohnuma (2012: 71), in most biographies is not associated with the sexual act.[26]

All of the above shows how, in drafting his account on the Buddha, Rashīd al-Dīn was closely following a Chinese source. But how did he, as a Persian and Muslim intellectual, understand Buddha's figure and message?

According to Prazniak (2014: 670), who analyzed Rashīd al-Dīn's account on Buddhism found in the *History of India*, "on one hand, Rashīd al-

[25] Rashīd al-Dīn writes that "since the beginning of his predication to the present time—the year of the Dragon, corresponding to the year 704 of the *Hijra*—2,336 years have passed". Considering that the year 704 of the *Hijra* corresponds to the year 1304 A.D., we can calculate Buddha's birth in the *History* as happening around the 11th century B.C. (1304-2336=1.032). On this also see Franke 1951, while on the date of Buddha's birth in Chinese sources see Franke 1991.

[26] The virginal birth of the Buddha is strikingly reminiscent, among other traditions, of the miraculous birth of Jesus, who is a prophet in his own right in Islam. His virginal birth is in fact mentioned in the Qur'an (consider Qur'an 66:12). However, Rashīd al-Dīn would have had no specific reason to juxtapose the two religious leaders.

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Dīn hoped to convey the importance of Buddhism in keeping with recent achievements of Mongol leaders devoted to this faith; on the other, he wanted to subordinate Buddhism to Islam". Her words provide a good starting point for our discussion. In fact, in the quoted excerpt Rashīd al-Dīn does not manifest any scepticism towards the story he reports, and words belonging to the semantic sphere of heresy are never used. The extraordinary details concerning the birth of the Buddha, who emerges as a successful and authentic religious leader with a conspicuous following, are reported without further comments. It appears that Rashīd al-Dīn confined himself to presenting the story as it was told in his source, merely amending those elements which would clash with an Islamic readership.

This impression is confirmed if, as Akasoy (2013) does in her analysis of the life of the Buddha found in the *History of India*, we turn our attention to the Arabic translation of the *History*, accomplished in 1315. As shown by Sheila Blair (2017), this translation was carried out in Tabriz under the direct supervision of Rashīd al-Dīn.[27] Thus, it carries all the authorial strength of the original text. Considering the Arabic text, Buddhism emerges as a legitimate religion with a prophet (*nabī*) who performs his religions obligations (*ishtaġala* […] *bi-'l-'ibāda*), and the birth of whom is marked by extraordinary circumstances, on which the shadow of doubt is never casted. Still, with reference to the Arabic text, while discussing the life of Laozi Rashīd al-Dīn uses the word *milla* in the context of a comparison between Laozi and Buddha (*millatu-hu* […] *wa millat Shikamūnī Burkhān*). Rashīd al-Dīn's account on Laozi will be discussed in detail in the second part of the article; yet, his use of the word *milla*, which has quite a rich semantic meaning, requires a brief discussion, for it sheds light on Rashīd al-Dīn's understanding of Buddha's predication

The word *milla* occurs multiple times in the Qur'an—in which it always means 'religion',—where it is also used in reference to Islam itself.[28]

[27] The manuscript of the Arabic version of the *History* is now part of the Khalili collection (Khalili MSS727) and has been reproduced and studied by Blair (2004, see ff. 250a-b for the Arabic text of the excerpt under discussion).

[28] Consider, for example, Qur'an 16:123 (English translation by Abdel Haleem 2005: 174): "Then We revealed to you [Muḥammad], 'Follow the creed [*milla*] of Abraham, a man of pure faith who was not an idolater.'" On *milla* and its meanings, see Buhl/ Bosworth 2012.

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Thus, it would be tempting to take this as an additional sign of Rashīd al-Dīn's will to present the movements started by Laozi and Buddha as legitimate 'religions' (*milla*), alongside Islamically 'irreproachable' confessions like Christianity or Judaism. Yet, it should be noted that the word *milla* soon came to be used to refer to any religiously marked community, so much so that in modern Persian its meaning shifted from 'religion' to 'nation' (*millat*). Such shift is attested at least since the 12th century, as shown by the distinction between *milla* as a 'form of society' (*ṣūrat al-ijtimāʿ*) and *dīn* as 'religion' drawn by the Muslim heresiographer al-Shahrastānī in his *Kitāb al-milal wa al-niḥal* (Book of sects and creeds), although it does not seem to have been prevalent at the time (Gimaret 2012). On this background, it seems that more than fostering a positive image of these movements Rashīd al-Dīn is keeping a balanced attitude through the use of a neutral language, simply reporting that Buddha and Laozi were at the head of a religious movement and were considered as prophets by their followers.

Concerning the Buddha's prophetic status, it should be noted how he is systematically referred to with the Arabic word *nabī*, but never with the word *rasūl*. This distinction is important in Islamic theology and, as shown by Anna Akasoy (2013: 181), is also maintained through the *History of India*. In fact, while in Arabic the word *nabī* designates the divinely inspired prophet, the word *rasūl* is only used for those special prophets sent by God to bring a divine message to humanity, such as Muḥammad and Jesus. Thus, qualifying Buddha as a *nabī* and not as a *rasūl*, Rashīd al-Dīn is granting him the status of a legitimate prophet, yet not of the same rank of the prophet of Islam. In the excerpt under discussion the conciliant although necessarily diminishing attitude of Rashīd al-Dīn towards the prophetic status of Buddha is reflected in the speech uttered by the infant Buddha soon after his birth.

While in canonical Buddhist texts the infant Buddha proclaims his divine nature and points to himself as the only worthy object of veneration, in the *History* the Buddha declares his prophetic status, but quickly adds that "other prophets will come" (*wa takallama wa qāla inna Allāh taʿālā arsalanī li-akūna nabiyyan ilā an yabʿaṯa ġayrī min al-anbīyā*).[29] This

[29] Rashīd al-Dīn's necessity to re-elaborate the discourse of the infant Buddha is easily

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points at Rashīd al-Dīn's intervention who must have tempered the claims made by the infant Buddha in his source. In fact, while in Islamic terms the recognition of the prophetic status of Buddha does not pose any major theological problem, the Qur'an clearly states that the last prophet is Muḥammad, the 'Seal of prophets' (*khātim al-nabīyīn*). Buddha making the same claim before him, besides breaking an Islamic dogma, would deprive Islam of any legitimacy. Here is Rashīd al-Dīn recognizing Buddha as a divinely inspired prophet, all while subordinating his prophetic claim to that of the prophet of Islam. An argumentative strategy to which the Ilkhanid vizier was not new, and on which also rests his discussion of Buddhism in the *History of India* (see Elverskog 2010: 145-162; Brack 2016: 195-276).

In discussing Buddhism and the life of his founder Rashīd al-Dīn had several predecessors, many of whom displayed a remarkable open-mindedness and were genuinely interested in understanding Buddhism.[30] With Laozi and Confucius however, whose lives he discusses a few pages later, Rashīd al-Dīn was to move into uncharted territory. These texts, alongside the question of Rashīd al-Dīn's Chinese sources, will be discussed in the second part of the article.

Appendix

The account on the birth of the Buddha in the *Fozu* (*juan* 3: 0495a20)[31]

> *The Revered One was born in the country of Jiapiluowei* (*Kapilavastu*)*, in the garden of* Lanpini (Lumbinī)*, under a pronged* shaluo (Shorea robusta) *tree. He came out of the right flank of his mother, Lady Moye.* [*He*] *was of*

understood considering the radicality of the claims advanced by the latter in canonical Buddhist texts, such as the Pali Mahāpadānasutta ('Discourse on the Great Legend', Walshe 1987: 205: "I am chief in the world, supreme in the world, eldest in the world. This is my last birth, there will be [henceforth for me] no more re-becoming") and its Chinese rendition (Waldschmidt 1953–1956: 90: "In heaven and on earth, I alone am worthy of veneration; I will free all beings from birth, old age, sickness and death").

[30] For a historical survey of the Buddhism and Muslim worlds' reciprocal knowledge, see Berzin 2010.

[31] 世尊生于迦毘羅衛國藍毘尼園沙羅叉樹下。從母摩耶夫人右脇而出。姓剎利。父淨飯天。母大清淨。生時九龍吐水。金盤沐己周行七步。自言。吾受最後生身。天上天下唯吾獨尊。相好莊嚴具三十二大人之相。For a German translation of this excerpt see Jahn 1971b: 42.

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chali (kṣatriya) *lineage.* [*His*] *father was Jing Fantian. The mother was of great purity.*[32] *At the time of* [*his*] *birth, nine dragons spit water. He was bathed in a golden vessel and then walked seven steps in a circle. He said: "I have taken up my last rebirth. In Heaven and Earth, I alone am the Revered One".*[33] *His appearance was beautiful and dignified and showed the thirty-two characteristics of a great man* [i.e. a Buddha].[34]

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[32] The expression *da qingjing* 大清淨 ('of great purity') is a standard attribute of the mother of Buddha and is borrowed here from a canonical text, the Chang Ahanjing 長阿含經 (Long Discourses). We would like to thank Martino Dibertulo Concu for pointing out this detail.

[33] Here the *Fozu* is paraphrasing the Chinese translation of the Pali Mahāpadānasutta (Discourse on the Great Legend), on which, see Waldschmidt, 1953–1956: 90 and *supra,* note 31.

[34] These are the typical marks of a Buddha. According to the commentary to the *Fozu*, these signs are: 1) the sole of the feet completely planted and balanced, 2) the mark [on his feet] of the thousand spoked-wheel (*dharmacakra*), 3) hands soft like *douluo* (Skr. *tūla*, 'cotton'), 4) webbed toes [and fingers] like a goose, 5) slender fingers, 6) full-sized heels, 7) arched insteps, 8) both arms perfectly straight, 9) legs perfect as those of an antelope king, 10) his *yin* peak (penis) repressed and tight like an elephant stallion king, 11) dark and curly hair, 12) a part in his hair, 13) golden skin, 14) soft delicate skin, 15) the "seven places" (i.e. two soles, two palms, two shoulders, and crown) well rounded, 16) perfectly shaped shoulders, 17) perfectly even armpits, 18) full and rosy cheeks, 19) body erect and upright, 20) the measure of a lonely willow, 21) lion-jawed, 22) a constant halo around his body extending for one *cun*, 23) teeth full and white, 24) teeth sparse and knife sharp, 25) saliva that improves the taste [of all food], 26) tongue long and broad, 27) voice deep and resonant, 28) dark purple eyelashes, 29) eyes like a royal bull, 30) face like a full moon, 31) white long hairs between the eyebrows, 32) darkly dignified smooth shout like the canopies of Heaven (一足下平滿。二千輻輪紋。三手柔軟如兜羅綿。四指間網鞔猶如鵝王。五諸指纖長。六足跟充滿。七足趺相承。八雙臂修直。九雙腨圓滿如伊尼延鹿王。十陰峯藏密如象馬王。十一毛青右旋。十二髮毛上靡。十三身皮金色。十四皮閏離垢。十五七處充滿。十六肩項殊妙。十七膊腋傭直。十八容儀紅滿。十九身相端嚴。二十量圓孤柳。二十一頷膽獅子。二十二常光一尋。二十三齒白齊密。二十四牙鮮鋒利。二十五常得上味。二十六舌覆面輪。二十七梵音頻伽。二十八眼睫紺青。二十九眼睛如牛王。三十面如滿月。三十一眉間白毫。三十二烏瑟膩吒猶如天蓋。*Fozu, juan* 3: 0495a20).

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